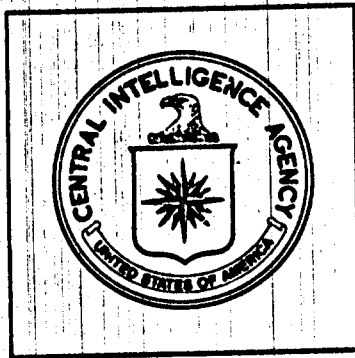


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# Latin American Trends

## STAFF NOTES

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August 23, 1976

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Sharp Reaction to Ecuador's Arrest of Priests

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The two-day detention last week of seventeen bishops and 21 priests from several Latin American countries and the US by Ecuadorean police has sparked sharp protest throughout Latin America from church authorities, violence by anti-clericals in Chile, and the excommunication of four government officials by the Chilean church.

The reasons for holding the church conclave in Riobamba, Ecuador, in the first place, are somewhat murky. Participants assert that the meeting was sponsored by the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) and was hosted by the Bishop of Riobamba, Leonidas Proano.

[REDACTED] it was strictly a long-planned pastoral gathering. [REDACTED] the meeting had been planned last year and involved problems of the poor in Latin America, in general, and indians in the Riobamba area, in particular.

Ecuadorean officials insist that the meeting was subversive, that the police confiscated subversive literature during the raid, and that some of the discussions constituted foreign intervention in internal Ecuadorean affairs.

These allegations notwithstanding, many Ecuadorean officials are confounded and think somebody made a serious mistake. So far, no one has claimed responsibility. Some rumors in Quito indicate that General Luis Duran, a staunchly conservative Catholic, may have been active behind the scenes. Another rumor blames landowners of politically conservative Chimborazo Province. Landowners there, suspicious of church efforts to improve the social and economic standing of the local indians, have long waged a campaign against the "progressive" Bishop Proano, often locally accused of being a "red."

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Whoever is responsible appears to have grossly underestimated the domestic and international effect. A cartoon, for example, in El Universo, an Ecuadorean newspaper, shows a trench-coated agent seizing documents labeled "catechism" from a group of priests. Other local comment has featured protests against human rights violations and ridicule of the government.

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Internationally, the comments have been much the same. The Latin American Episcopal Council's secretary-general denounced the action and said, "When the church speaks on behalf of human rights and social change, it is not calling for changes of government." Mexican church officials have protested the violations of "human rights" and have complained that Ecuadorean authorities should not have interfered in a religious meeting. These sentiments have been echoed by church authorities in other countries and all church leaders have made an effort to publicize the return home of the now famous prelates.

The homecoming of three Chilean bishops, however, resulted in an incident that is going to have more far-reaching consequences. Rightist opponents of Chilean church policy clashed at the Santiago airport with supporters of the three churchmen. Chilean police [redacted] stood by passively and intervened only after the fighting became general. Their action or inaction has led to local speculation that the government condoned the demonstration. Chilean authorities have denied these allegations and are taking some steps to head off a confrontation with the church. [redacted] nevertheless, [redacted] could not recall any examples of physical violence between politically motivated, polarized elements in Chile since the early days of the junta in November 1973.

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One result of the airport incident has been a move by the church to excommunicate some government officials, including several agents of the security police, for either participating in or permitting the demonstration. The church's official statement cast the incident in a broader context by declaring that the Ecuadorean government's "arbitrary action, encouraged by friendly governments, represented a manifest act of hostility against the church." It condemned the controlled Chilean media for false reporting and compared the airport incident to events under the Allende regime, "when anti-social elements fought with representatives of order."

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The Chilean church has been spoiling for a fight with the government for some time and this incident has brought the trouble to maturation. For several months, church officials have been protesting the arrest of a popular human-rights lawyer employed by the Vicarate of Solidarity. The church has argued that the lawyer cannot be held without due process and has described the government's charges against him as slander. Chilean bishops, clearly influenced by the case and the "progressive" Vicarate of Solidarity, [redacted] agreed in June to increase their opposition to the government. [redacted] the mistreatment of priests demonstrated the anti-clerical nature of the government, and agreed to make use of the pulpit and all Catholic organizations to criticize government policies.

What the final outcome of the Ecuadorean affair will be for the church and the governments involved cannot yet be determined. Certainly, the Ecuadorean government has been embarrassed at least temporarily by the commotion it has caused. There is no doubt also that the incident and its ramifications will add fuel to the simmering conflict between the church and military governments in most of Latin America.

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The Chilean situation could be more serious because the incident there is a sure sign of growing political tension. Increasingly overt church opposition to the government will stiffen the resolve of restless and potentially more vocal critics. [REDACTED]  
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